

**SPECIAL COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE (PUBLIC) 13 December 2021
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Sense of Belonging at School

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PURPOSE:

1. Using data from *Valuing Voices - Identity Matters! Student Survey* conducted in 2019-2020, this report examines the following questions:
 - a) How do OCDSB students rate their sense of belonging at school?
 - b) How does a sense of belonging at school vary across demographic characteristics and identities?
 - c) What do students identify as being important for contributing to their sense of belonging at school?

STRATEGIC LINKS:

2. The findings of this report directly connect to the OCDSB's strategic goal of creating a culture of caring, and its objectives directed at advancing equity and a sense of school belonging to promote a safe and caring community. By establishing the current state of students' sense of school belonging and contributing factors, the insights from this report can be used to identify and implement specific actions to create an inclusive, safe and caring environment for all OCDSB students.
3. Findings from this report are closely tied to some of the key milestones and activities in the *OCDSB Indigenous, Equity and Human Rights Roadmap 2020-2023*. For example, the goals and milestones identified under Engagement and Connectedness aim to build and strengthen collaborative relationships with Indigenous, Black and minoritized students, parents and staff to create a community of belonging, promote excellence and inform actions to eliminate disparities and disproportionalities in service delivery.

CONTEXT:

4. Perceptual data about the overall school experience (e.g. well-being, sense of belonging, bullying, exit outcomes, etc.) has typically been collected through bi-annual School Climate Surveys which are mandated by the Education Act. Results from these surveys have informed various programs and activities to improve the learning environment within OCDSB schools. In 2019, the *Valuing Voices - Identity Matters! Student Survey* made it possible to collect additional perceptual data on sense of belonging, well-being, safety, extracurricular activities and other school experiences, alongside a comprehensive set of demographic data. The richness of this data allows for enhanced reporting of student data through an equity lens to identify patterns and trends in student outcomes and experiences. Ultimately, these results serve as a basis for discussions with internal and external stakeholders to develop strategies aimed at eliminating systemic barriers and biases that may be contributing to inequitable opportunities and outcomes for students.
5. Sense of school belonging is commonly defined as the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment. It is a complex construct that is associated with a variety of personal characteristics (e.g. demographic characteristics, academic motivation, emotional stability) and external influences (e.g. peer relationship and support, teacher support, parent support, engagement in extracurricular activities, school safety and other physical environment characteristics).
6. Research has consistently found students' sense of school belonging to be associated with academic outcomes, psychological adjustment, well-being, identity formation, mental and physical health, and is therefore considered to be a fundamental aspect of development.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS:

Collection, Analysis and Reporting of Identity Based Data

7. This is the fourth in a series of reports that begins to look at barriers to student achievement and well-being with a view to effecting change that will result in greater support and more equitable outcomes for students who have been minoritized. Data for this report primarily comes from the *Valuing Voices – Identity Matters! Student Survey* conducted in 2019-2020, prior to the pandemic.

Data collection, analysis and reporting of identity data is governed by the *Ontario Anti-Racism Act* (2017), and the [Data Standards for the Identification and Monitoring of System Racism](#) (2018). Additional details can be found in the Technical Considerations in Appendix A.

Measuring Equity: Overview of Findings

8. A total of 31,985 individuals, representing 42% of the student population (75,817), responded to the sense of school belonging question on the *Valuing Voices* survey. Sixty-six percent (21,194) of respondents were students in grades 7-12 and 34% (10,791) were parents of students (JK-6).

School belonging is most commonly defined as, "*the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment*" (Goodenow & Grady, 1993). Research has shown that a strong sense of school belonging contributes to student success in terms of academics, psychological adjustment, well-being, identity formation, and mental and physical health. At a fundamental level, students with a strong sense of school belonging enjoy being at school. They are happy to be at school because they feel accepted, not just interpersonally, but also from an overall physical school environment perspective. This positive association leads to overall higher engagement across different aspects of the school experience and ultimately leads to better outcomes. Conversely, students who do not feel a strong sense of school belonging tend to become disengaged and may experience isolation or estrangement, which can adversely affect their academic performance and overall wellbeing. While this report did not specifically analyze academic outcomes in relation to sense of school belonging, it is important to consider that many groups of students that reported a lower sense of school belonging also experienced lower academic achievement (based on report card data and credit accumulation) and higher rates of suspension.

Key highlights include:

- sense of belonging at school tends to decline in adolescence;
- a sense of belonging at school may be experienced differently by students based on personal characteristics (i.e., how they identify, demographic characteristics). In the OCDSB, students who self-identified as First Nation, Metis, and/or Inuit reported a lower sense of school belonging¹, as did students who identified their race as Indigenous, Latino, and Southeast Asian (7-12 only), those with a disability, and those from the gender diverse community;
- sense of school belonging is affected by a complex set of factors (e.g., personal characteristics, support from family, peers and teachers, the social and organizational culture at schools, and broader policies, norms and cultural values);
- respondents identified the following as being important for promoting a sense of belonging for them (or their child) at school:
 - **support** from educators, parents/family, and peers (e.g., opportunities to talk to educators to get support and encouragement for their learning and well-being, support from other students in the school);

¹ Smaller proportions reported a strong sense of school belonging, while larger proportions reported a low sense of school belonging.

- **social interactions/interpersonal experiences** allow for greater recognition, acceptance, respect, collaboration, tolerance, and equity;
- **learning experience** (e.g., instructional practices in classrooms such as teaching methodology, content, learning material, and evaluation; parents of children in JK to grade 6 also identified “time in school” as an important element in transition and adjusting to the school environment);
- **relationships** to promote a feeling of connection or similarity with someone (i.e., friends, peers, educators, or admin staff) at school based on a particular interest, background, or other trait;
- **school staff** (educators and support staff) are instrumental in creating an environment that promotes a positive sense of school belonging through communication, engagement, providing care, and creating a welcoming and inclusive learning environment in classrooms; and
- **diversity and representation** (i.e., presence of identity-based differences and uniqueness such as: ethnicity, religion, culture, tradition, race, gender, sexual orientation), including acknowledgement/recognition of, and respect for, various dimensions of one’s own identity (i.e., race, religion, gender identity, language etc.).

9. Current Initiatives and Next Steps

Findings from this report underscore the importance of fostering a learning environment for students where they feel a strong sense of belonging which, in turn, contributes to their overall well-being and academic success. The following actions, some of which may already be in progress or being planned, are ways in which students’ sense of school belonging may be positively impacted:

- Building healthy student-teacher relationships.*** Teachers often spend more face-to-face time with children than any other person and, by default, have become the most significant others in their students' lives and an important source of security and stability (Allen et al., 2021). This is especially true for students already burdened by a sense of rejection. Positive teacher-student relationships is foundational to the *Third Path Framework* which is a key strategy in the District’s effort to promote a culture of caring and social responsibility. This framework highlights that these relationships must be developmental - those which are grounded in authenticity, attunement and responsiveness to the needs of students and where educators demonstrate empathy & care, taking time to truly know students both inside and outside of the classroom (Tranter, Carson & Boland, 2018).
- Creating opportunities for students to participate in group activities.*** Activities that promote interaction among students (e.g. group work, collaborative assignments and projects, extracurricular activities, etc.) create opportunities for students to get to know each other better and have the

potential to improve interpersonal relationships. Some examples of concrete actions being taken by the OCDSB include:

- implementing the Rainbow Bridges Program to support 2SLGBTQ+ students transitioning to secondary in three secondary and feeder schools;
- rolling out the Youth Leading Youth workshops (digital and face-to-face), which are led by students from equity-seeking groups;
- establishing student leadership councils (Black, Muslim, 2SLGBTQ+, students with disabilities);
- conducting annual network events focusing on Indigenous knowledge, equity and human rights themes for students, staff, parents/guardians and communities (Date with Diversity and Speakers Series);
- establishing annual Muslim and Newcomer Youth Forums; and,
- establishing an annual Conference for Girls.

c) ***Nurturing social and emotional competencies in students.*** Social and emotional learning can help students engage in more positive and thoughtful communication with each other and learn to respect diversity and identity expression, which in turn affects sense of school belonging. These skills are highlighted throughout materials provided from School Mental Health Ontario (SMH-ON) which include mentally healthy classroom resources (ie. lesson plans, virtual field trips and SEL videos for students) that are shared with educators throughout the District. SMH-ON recognizes the need for culturally responsive social-emotional learning and continues to build and provide current resources and materials for all educators across Ontario. In light of input from parents and students responding to the *Valuing Voices* survey and results from the OECD Study on Social and Emotional Skills (2021), providing opportunities for students to develop skills in the areas of cooperation, optimism, and sociability may be especially important.

d) ***Taking deliberate actions towards addressing inequities in systems, structures, policies and practices.*** Unjust or unfair treatment² may negatively impact one's sense of school belonging, especially in adolescence and beyond, whereas fair treatment of all students can positively impact student success and well-being and build trust with students, families and communities. The [OCDSB Indigenous, Equity and Human Rights Roadmap, 2020-2023](#) (2020) outlines several strategies, goals and milestones to be achieved over the next few years that will begin to tackle some of the institutional barriers that have prevented some students from feeling like they belong at school, including:

- developing and implementing an Equitable Recruitment Strategy;
- providing mandatory training modules for all staff on Diversity and Inclusion Fundamentals and Unconscious Bias (anti-racism and anti-oppression);

² Fairness means the quality of treating people equally or in a way that is right or reasonable (Cambridge dictionary).

- providing training modules for all staff on Indigenous knowledge and rights, anti-racism, anti-oppression, and human rights;
- developing and implementing Anti-racism, anti-Islamophobia, anti-transphobia and anti-homophobia communication campaigns; and
- undertaking an Employee Systems Review.

- e) ***Celebrating and ensuring diversity and representation.*** Research suggests that sense of belonging can be positively impacted by seeing more same-race/ ethnic peers and staff at school. This was reinforced in the *Valuing Voices* survey data where moderate correlations were found between ratings of sense of belonging and the following statements: “*my identity is welcomed at school*” and “*I feel represented at school*”. Similarly, parents of children with a low sense of school belonging frequently shared how diversity and representation would contribute to their child’s sense of belonging in school. Some specific actions and next steps in this regard, include:
- establishing a compulsory Grade 11 English: Understanding Contemporary First Nations, Métis and Inuit Voices across all pathways;
 - including Indigenous, Black and minoritized, and 2SLGBTQI+ histories, contributions and perspectives in Social Studies, History and Geography, Grade 9-12 English curricula; and
 - examining staff demographic data from the *Valuing Staff Voices Survey* conducted in the spring of 2021 in relation to student demographics to identify areas where service delivery could be improved through better workforce representation.

10. Identity-based Data

A measured approach to the analysis and reporting of identity data has been taken over the past year to allow for important conversations to take place with community representatives and to integrate their perspectives into reporting. In so doing, some aspects of identity have yet to be examined, as do intersections between different dimensions of identity. A schedule for additional reports is yet to be determined, however, it is clear that the establishment of thresholds will be necessary in order to facilitate interpretation of the differences being observed and ongoing monitoring of our efforts moving forward. Establishment of data sharing protocols with First Nations communities and development of an open data policy also remain priorities for the Research, Evaluation & Analytics Division (READ) team.

RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS:

11. To date, the District has received \$258,000 in one-time funding through Transfer Payment Agreements (TPA) to support this work up to August 2022. These funds were used to hire consultant services for the facilitation of focus groups and community partner meetings, and research staff to support analysis and reporting. An additional \$200,000 was allocated through the annual budget

process for the 2020-2021 school year to support the governance work (e.g., establishment of data sharing agreements with First Nations communities, development of an open data policy) and extension of contract staff in the *Research, Evaluation and Analytics Division*.

12. A Technical Advisory Group (TAG) has been established to support ongoing work on reporting with identity based data to ensure alignment with the Data Standards. TAG met five times during 2020-2021, providing a forum for engaging community organizations in ongoing input and dialogue regarding research methodology and statistical analysis of identity data. These opportunities have been instrumental in helping to shape our thinking and shift our approaches to reporting to meet the needs of the diverse community we serve. TAG will continue to meet regularly during 2021-2022.
13. A full day of professional learning in applying a data equity framework to project planning and implementation took place through *We All Count* in January/February 2021. Twenty OCDSB staff from READ, Communications, Learning Support Services (LSS), Program and Learning (PAL), and Human Resources (HR) participated. The READ team, strategic business analysts, and program evaluator from Learning Support Services have benefitted from participating in six 1.5 hour follow-up discussion sessions with the founder, providing an opportunity to deepen our understanding and application of the work. Costs associated with this portion of the work amounted to \$8,000 and were absorbed by the operating budget. This work will continue throughout 2021-2022, with targeted professional development opportunities being planned for senior staff and Trustees at a cost of \$18,000.
14. Ongoing communication about the use of the survey data to the community, particularly to participants, is a vital part of the process. Sharing the process and results, both in report format, infographic and through an open data set for public use, increases credibility, usability and impact. It is important for participants to see how the data is treated, how their responses are being used, and the impact that their participation has on the future work of the organization.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

The following questions are provided for discussion purposes:

- a) How does this information inform our understanding about sense of belonging?
- b) What stands out for you in the data/information that is presented?
- c) How will this information help to eliminate systemic barriers and bias?
- d) What actions, next steps and/or resources should be considered?

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